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SUBJECT: PALACE ADVISOR AZOULAY DISCUSSES ISRAEL-MOROCCO
RELATIONS

Classified By: POLOFF MARCEL MARTINEZ FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador met with Andre Azoulay, Royal Advisor to King Mohammed VI and a prominent Jewish Moroccan, on December 2 to discuss Azoulay's early November visit to Israel, which included meetings with the senior Israeli and Palestinian leaderships and a stop in the Gaza Strip. Azoulay noted that Morocco's decision to help Palestinians is a "political choice." In Gaza, Azoulay visited "old friend" Mahmoud Abbas, who told Azoulay "we need you" and asked the Moroccans to "use your leverage" to help Palestinians vis a vis Israel. Azoulay also highlighted the growing importance that Moroccan Jews play in the current Israeli political environment, occupying leadership positions. He believed that the majority of Moroccans are open to the idea of warmer relations with Israel, but that some, particularly the Islamists, do not agree with normalization, essentially equating it to treason. Discussing contacts he enjoyed with the US in the 1990s', Azoulay expressed some disappointment that the US does not seek out his advice more on the peace process. END SUMMARY.

Azoulay Visits Israel

12. (SBU) On December 2, the Ambassador, accompanied by Poloff, called on Royal Advisor Andre Azoulay to discuss Azoulay's November recent trip to Israel and the Gaza Strip. Azoulay headed a delegation of Moroccan Jews, which included Moroccan Jewish community leaders Serge Berdugo and Robert Ashraf, to Israel November 3-4 to participate in a forum entitled "Moroccan Jewry and its Dispersion." According to press reports, Azoulay met with Israeli President Katsav, Prime Minister Sharon, and then-Vice Prime Minister Peres. Azoulay also visited the Gaza Strip where he met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Putting his recent visit into context, Azoulay explained that for the past 40 years, long before he was a counselor to the king, he has been engaged in a process for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Commenting on his personal involvement in the peace process, Azoulay remarked that despite his Jewish ancestry his "paradoxical" objective is to help Palestinians.

13. (SBU) Moving to Moroccan objectives, Azoulay noted that Morocco is not involved in Israeli-Palestinian relations for philanthropic reasons or because of the large number of Moroccan Jews, but that it is a "political choice" to help Palestinians. In his view, peace between Israelis and Palestinians certainly would be welcomed by the international community, but more importantly, peace would benefit Morocco.

However, Azoulay commented to the Ambassador that Morocco has recently been less engaged politically on peace-related issues.

Mahmoud Abbas: We Need Morocco's Help

¶4. (C) Describing his six-hour meeting with "my old friend Mahmoud Abbas" in the Gaza Strip, Azoulay said that Abbas presented to him a list of actions Morocco could take to help improve the Palestinian position. According to Azoulay, Abbas said in a reference to Moroccan support in dealing with Israel, "we need you" and "we need you to use your leverage."

Demographic Realities

¶5. (SBU) Highlighting the growing importance of Moroccan Jews in Israel, Azoulay described the leadership role Moroccan Jews play in current Israeli politics. He said Moroccan Jews enjoy large representation in Israel's political scene. Azoulay singled out Amos Peretz, the new head of the Israeli Labor Party and good friend of Azoulay, as demonstrating Moroccan influence in Israel. (NB: Peretz is a Moroccan Jew born in the northeastern Moroccan town of Oujda, but left Morocco at the age of four.) Azoulay also noted that a large portion of the Israeli Likud Party's administration, a several prominent religious leaders in Israel, and 40 percent of mayors and municipal leaders of Israeli cities are of Moroccan descent.

¶6. (SBU) With their Arab and Jewish cultures intertwined, Azoulay noted that the 600,000 Jews of Moroccan descent living in Israel are in a very unique position to foster links between Arabs and Jews. (NB: Other reporting commonly cites the number of Israelis of Moroccan descent as closer to 900,000). Azoulay described an event he attended in Israel

at which a Jewish leader led a chant in Arabic that put the mixed crowd at ease, and also set a positive tone for the rest of the conference. That was the kind of bridging role that Moroccans could play, Azoulay emphasized.

¶7. (SBU) Azoulay also added that Moroccan Jews in Israel are now third generation. In his view, their links back to Morocco and its culture have become stronger from one generation to the next. He explained that, for their own pleasure and to preserve their Moroccan identity, Moroccan Jews have done all they can to keep their Moroccan memories, language, music, and cuisine.

Moroccan Public Open to Normalization

¶8. (SBU) Azoulay said a majority of Moroccans approve of normalizing relations with Israel, but that some in Morocco do not agree. He explained that a segment of the population, particularly the Islamists, do not like the idea of warmer relations with Israel and think it is equivalent to "treason" by the government. Azoulay emphasized to Ambassador that no matter how much opposition he receives because of his stance on the issue, he will not alter his commitment to normalization between Morocco and Israel. (Note: Not surprisingly, Morocco's Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) reacted negatively to the Azoulay visit, calling on Morocco not to move forward in normalizing with Israel. Since Azoulay's return, two Israeli parliamentarians participated in a Euro-Med parliamentary conference in Rabat, also drawing the ire of the PJD and triggering a small sit-in Rabat in which participants reportedly denigrated Azoulay personally).

¶9. (C) On the possibility of reopening the Israeli liaison office in Rabat, Azoulay said it was not discussed during his

visit and that it is "not on the agenda." Azoulay does not think the liaison office is an important issue, because the office "can be open one day and closed the next." Instead, he believes Morocco and Israel need to work on structural issues that will help strengthen their relationship, because as he noted, "there is still lots to do."

Unexploited Expertise?

¶10. (SBU) Turning to his previous cooperation with the USG on Israeli-Palestinian issues, Azoulay recounted the good contacts he enjoyed with the US in the 1990s and early 2000. He expressed some disappointment that the US no longer consults him or asks him to work on peace process projects.

"Alliance of Civilizations"

¶11. (C) Azoulay provided a brief description of the United Nations High-Level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations, which Azoulay is involved in, and its mandate. (Comment: Azoulay is frequently involved in religious and cultural activities that bring together Arabs, Jews, and Christians). He sees his role in this endeavor as trying to find a way to pacify, reconnect, and organize relations between Muslim states and the West. While mentioning a concept paper on the topic that is underway, Azoulay revealed that he has a difference of opinions with fellow group member Mohammed Khatami, former Iranian President. Azoulay did not provide details on the divergence.

Comment

¶12. (C) Azoulay clearly appreciated this opportunity to share his views on issues he obviously cares deeply about. He remains prominent among the King's royal advisors and is an important interlocutor between Israel and Morocco, although President of the Moroccan Jewish Community Serge Berdugo appears to be play a more significant role as a go-between when particularly sensitive issues are at stake. Azoulay's visit to Israel, during which Katsav invited King Mohammed to visit Israel, was likely designed to show that Morocco remains open to deepening engagement with Israel and has no complex about public interactions with Israeli officials. The GOM also seeks to keep the issue of normalization in the Moroccan public eye by periodically engaging with Israeli officials, although senior Moroccan officials rarely visit Israel.
Riley